

# RDA: Imminent Debacle

The editor of AACR2 takes issue with cataloging's new direction by Michael Gorman

There is an old story of an international committee watching a demonstration of a new invention. Everyone was impressed by its speed and efficiency, everyone, that, is but the French delegate. He leaned back in his chair and said: "It obviously works in practice . . . but does it work in theory?"

Followers of that man's school of thought have hijacked the Anglo-American cataloging code revision process and the practical result of their theoretical approach promises to be the biggest disaster to hit descriptive cataloging since the draft rules of 1941 (consigned justly to the dustbin of history, but an instructive example of how wrong groups of well-intentioned people can be).

A steady progression in the formulation of cataloging rules has followed the one-person codes of the 19th century created by the giants Anthony Panizzi and Charles Ammi Cutter: the subsequent committee codes and the seminal work of the 20th century giant Seymour Lubetzky, the Paris principles, the first abortive attempt at post-Lubetzky Anglo-American cataloging rules of 1968, the formulation of the ideal of Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC), the formulation and adoption of the MARC format, the creation of the International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD), and the creation of the Anglo-American cataloging rules, second edition (AACR2)—a flawed but fundamentally sound expression of Lubetzkyan principles.

All these forces were progressive in that they contributed to an unprecedented level of international standardization and resulting cooperation based on MARC and ISBD being adopted worldwide, AACR2 being translated into many languages and adopted or used as the basis for national codes outside the Anglo-American community of nations, and steady progress toward the ideal of UBC. So, it has all

worked very well in practice but not, apparently, in theory—at least not in the eyes of the Joint Steering Committee for the Development of RDA (Resource Description and Access), the international body that has been entrusted with the responsibility for the maintenance of this progress toward release by ALA in 2009.

## Looming calamity

There are a number of reasons why this calamity is looming. One is the drive to resolve the problem of cataloging by giving access to electronic records through the use of "metadata" applied by non-catalogers. The simplistic idea is that vast numbers of electronic documents can be cataloged effectively by having their creators apply uncontrolled terms in a few simple categories. In other

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words, that the results achieved by cataloging using controlled vocabularies and the bibliographic structures of catalogs—complex, labor-intensive, skilled activities—can be achieved on the cheap and without the use of those essential structures. It is hard to believe the world's libraries have taken metadata seriously.

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logging. Welcome to the wonderful world of 1,321,957 "hits" in random order—those "hits" having abysmally low recall and relevance ratios.

Lastly, there is the attachment on the part of the theoreticians to the document Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR). FRBR may have some merit as a way of looking at the theory of cataloging; it has little as a foundational document for creating a cataloging code. Never mind that the structure of bibliographic records set out in AACR2/ISBD is well established, accepted by scholars and other catalog users for decades, and with minor flaws in concept and expression that could easily be corrected—it works in practice, but does it work in theory? This is the witches' brew of ignorance, neophilia, and the exaltation of theo-

ry over practice that has given birth to the draft RDA, a work on which the Joint Steering Committee has labored for a number of years (*AL*, Oct., p. 66). Did anyone ask why the JSC did not work on updating and revising AACR2? If they did, they were undoubtedly given the usual nonsense about having to reach out to the metadata "community," the supposed need to allow the cataloging of electronic resources (as if AACR2/ISBD were not perfectly and demonstrably capable of accommodating all formats, including electronic documents), and the general Rovian blather that always accompanies excuses for failed policy decisions.

### Three horrifying things

I have studied the drafts of RDA that have been made available and am horrified by them for many reasons. First, there is no good practical reason why the structure of AACR2 has been abandoned in favor of an incoherent hodge-podge of general and special rules on all formats as found in the new draft. Just one example from many: in Chapter 2, "Identification of the resource," before there is a single rule on recording the simplest descriptive data, there are nine pages of detailed, complex, and often redundant introductory instructions. In another example, a basic rule (2.2 "Sources of information") contains no general rule and is made up of three specific rules (on resources comprising pages or page images, graphic materials, moving image materials) with a fourth rule on "other resources."

Second, the ISBD is used as the basis for description in almost all modern cataloging codes, and its order and punctuation (mirroring as they do the MARC format) are accepted throughout the world. It is, therefore, astounding to read that "RDA is not structured around the areas and elements specified in ISBD (G)" in the draft RDA.

(ISBD(G)—the basic ISBD—was drawn up in concert with the creation of AACR2 and subsequently adopted internationally.) Another RDA statement—that their rules do not "represent a prescribed order for purposes of presentation of the data"—is a definitive rejection of the ISBD standard. One important consequence of this disastrous decision is that instead of presenting general rules first and then special rules and instead of following the universally accepted order of the ISBD, Part I of the RDA is divided into six chapters, each of which mixes up general and specific instructions. The first is "General instructions" (many of which are highly specific), and the subsequent chapters are grouped around the supposed functions of data elements as determined by the Laputan FRBR.

Third, RDA gives its examples without ISBD punctuation and with only the element that is subject to the rule—that is completely out of context. This makes them virtually incomprehensible to cataloging students and, in some cases, to any reader of the RDA. Earth to RDA: Examples are supposed to illuminate rules, not confuse the reader.

Fourth, the draft RDA is an editorial disaster. Many of its "guidelines" (rules are passé to these people) are incomprehensible and internally inconsistent. I read more than 60 pages very carefully and came up with 15 pages of editorial errors.

Last, the foregoing applies to the first part of RDA—the most developed thus far. The following parts—on assignment of name/title access points—are only partial as I write but already display a massive confusion. The drafts I have seen consist of undigested gobbets of rules taken from AACR2 in an incomprehensible or-

der. The basic step in assigning access points is the determination of authorship (who is the creator responsible for the intellectual or artistic content of the work?). This is not to determine the "main entry" (a largely irrelevant idea in modern catalogs) but to start a logical process leading to coherent catalogs. The drafts of RDA do not include rules on this first step, but do include rules (oops, guidelines) on making subsidiary access points—an approach so absurd that it almost defies description.

### Boogie-woogie Google boys

The RDA seeks to find a third way between standard cataloging (abandoning a slew of international agreements and understandings) on the one hand and the metadata crowd and boogie-woogie Google boys on the other. The sad thing is that betraying the former has not managed to appease the latter. Articles stating that RDA will be dead on arrival have already appeared, not because it is a mess and a giant leap backwards for cataloging but because the neophiliacs think it is not a radical enough break with the past.

This is a sad time for cataloging and the millions of users of library catalogs—not only do we have the appalling RDA but also the

Library of Congress is talking openly of abandoning important elements of its national bibliographic service (including the LC list of subject headings), thereby letting down both the libraries in this country that depend on them and their international partners; and many LIS schools have all but abandoned the teaching of cataloging. Where's the outrage? Maybe it is Big Yellow Taxi time for cataloging—and we won't know what we've got 'til it's gone. ■

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